

## Oil Sensoria

By Elizabeth M. Holt | July 6, 2022

Surprisingly little critical work has been done on the intersection of oil and Arabic literature, despite the centrality of the carbon economy to the region's history. Amitav Ghosh coined the phrase "petrofiction" in a review of Saudi writer Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* in 1992, principally to mark the dearth of novels about oil despite its ubiquity in our lives. Oil is an elusive object of narration, at once everywhere, and yet a thematic focus of relatively few works of literature. Ghosh points readers to Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* as one of the only other examples of a petronovel in world literature. Criticism of petroleum's place in the Arabic novel continues to pivot around Munif and Kanafani, with Ellen McLarney's "Empire of the Machine" serving as an exemplar of this critical trend, while more recently Hanan Hammad has taken up the Arabic oil novel in relation to the question of mobility in postcolonial Egypt and its entanglements with the petro-economy. If the study of petrofiction has in many regards barely begun for Arabic, scholars such as Jennifer Wenzel in the African context and those involved in the Petrocultures group offer a framework for a broader analysis of the border-crossing genres of petroculture. In much of this critical work, the novel poses as a passive reflection of what petroleum has wrought, or collides with the omnipresence of products and moments in everyday life derived of petroleum, such that perhaps every contemporary novel becomes a petronovel.

***Reading petroleum as it is reflected in the pages of novels, or for what objects and plots oil has decreed for petrofiction, therefore threatens to limit our ability to perceive the oil complex and with it, the ways that oil makes novels and poetry.***

In her recent book *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk*, Arbella Bet-Shlimon offers a way to read oil and the Arabic press otherwise, drawing comparatively on figurings of petroleum in the African context. Bet-Shlimon insists we read oil through the "oil complex," articulating a sensorium of petroleum "as a composite of institutions and as a means of political, social, and economic production."<sup>[1]</sup> This methodological pivot allows Bet-Shlimon to point readers to the importance of the British Petroleum- and Royal Dutch Shell-owned Iraq Petroleum Company's in-house publications such as *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al-Naft*, as well as the library branch opened in Kirkuk by the United States Information Services, and the flourishing of literary production in the 1950s and 1960s alongside the IPC's intensive oil extraction. A key editor of these IPC publications was the Palestinian poet, painter, novelist, and translator Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, while the Arabic-English translator Denys Johnson-Davies was involved in similar projects for American oil companies in the Gulf. The IPC publications operated within a landscape of public-private partnerships, whereby the US and British governments worked with private companies and local governments to drill for oil and erect a region-wide system of pipelines. Come the 1960s, China would in turn fund radical Gulf politics in an attempt to gain access to the region's oil markets, to be delivered

by tanker across the waters of the Indian Ocean. A publication like *Ahl al-Naft* emerges, then, as both produced by petroleum, but also in turn productive of the materiality of oil, its future flows, and the institutions that maintain this global energy order. Reading petroleum as it is reflected in the pages of novels, or for what objects and plots oil has decreed for petrofiction, therefore threatens to limit our ability to perceive the oil complex and with it, the ways that oil makes novels and poetry.

In 1954, the globally distributed anti-Communist London magazine *Encounter* ran one of many advertisements for Shell oil, this one entitled “Oil Is Our Way of Life.” An unusually direct depiction of the extractive imperial logic of Cold War petroleum, Shell enumerates the many daily apparitions of oil (“the linoleum on her kitchen floor,” “the nail-varnish on her dressing table,” “the basic amenities of your life on earth,” “it speeds the plough”). Published by “The Shell Petroleum Co. Ltd., St. Helen’s Court, London,” the ad ends: “Petroleum in its crude form, dredged from the desert, marsh, and jungle, is an unfriendly substance, dark, often sticky, sometimes smelly. But the products of its refinement oil the wheels of life: cleanly, smoothly and increasingly.” Oil here is depicted through the extractive logic of empire, whereby raw materials are drawn out from the earth’s deserts, marshes, and jungles to be refined in the imperial center, rather like the Euro-American-centered map of world literature animating Pascale Casanova’s seminal and widely cited *World Republic of Letters*. And oil here is underwriting those imperial centers, not just ideologically in the copy of this full-page ad, but in the material support Shell oil is lending *Encounter* magazine, published by the Paris-headquartered Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a Cold War project covertly founded and funded by the United States Central Intelligence Agency in 1950.

Following the Bandung conference in 1955 and its calls for Afro-Asian solidarity amid trenchant critiques of imperialism and colonialism, the CCF extended its operations far beyond Europe, turning to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Denys Johnson-Davies, and Albert Hourani (among others) as they planned their Arabic operations. Johnson-Davies published *Aswat*, an Arabic journal out of London, in the early 1960s, and extended his expertise to undercover CIA agent John C. Hunt in the Paris offices of the CCF. Jabra would be involved in *Aswat* and other projects of the CCF including the 1961 Rome Conference; was courted as editor of the short-lived journal *Adab* and then the CCF’s highly influential Arabic magazine, *Hiwar* (Beirut, 1962–1967); and served as a frequent contributor of poetry and prose to *Hiwar*. Jabra was also an active translator with the State Department (and partly CIA)-funded Franklin Books project, and in 1963 translated William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* into Arabic, a decisive literary event that influenced many Arab writers. Faulkner was promoted throughout the CCF global network, with his particular take on American modernism proving deeply influential to authors publishing in CCF journals, including Chinua Achebe, Tayeb Salih, and Gabriel García-Márquez. Jabra would likewise translate T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” with Eliot’s modernist influences on Arabic poetry widely evident.

Shifting from a search for petronovels, we can begin to see how oil and modernism are mutually constitutive global phenomena. Methodologically, we can then link the production of Iraq’s oil wells to the production of Tayeb Salih’s novels or Badr Shakir al-Sayyab’s poetry, via the institutions that make up this Cold War oil sensorium. In addition to highly influential modernist magazines, the CCF put on art exhibits and concerts of classical and twelve-tone music, and hosted important conferences, including the 1961 Rome Conference for the Arab

Writer and the Makerere Conference on African Literature of English Expression in 1962. Monica Popescu, writing on the African context, argues for an understanding of the Cultural Cold War in this period as a battle of the conferences, and indeed the Soviet-funded Afro-Asian Writers Association and the Chinese-funded Afro-Asian Writers Bureau put on a number of high-profile international conferences in the wake of Bandung. Richard Wright attended Bandung as an observer for the CCF, and the reader of his *The Color Curtain* encounters a fascinating portrait of Afro-Asian solidarity as Wright's petro-fueled plane touched down in Cairo for more passengers and to refuel, and then took off again, heading east to Bandung, gesturing to the carbon footprint of the Cold War.

"It is not for the modern Petroleum Industry to interrupt your dreams," Shell oil told readers of *Encounter* in 1954. And yet come 1977 in Casper, Wyoming, it was just this sort of petro-fueled modernism that led American poet Allen Ginsberg to write "T. S. Eliot Entered My Dreams": "'And yourself,' I said, 'What did you think of the domination of poetics by the CIA.'" While Eliot finds it all "petty," the first-person narrator channels Ginsberg as he decries "the repression of indigenous cultures in favor of Western-oriented big business scientism based on Petrochemical Affairs, oil Bigness," taking form later in the piece as "the oily Seven Sisters." It was "As if oil had a voice — of 'right-minded men' thoughtful conservative well fed & well paid all dependent on petrochemical culture — exquisite executives and exquisite academicians — all with clean hands." Eliot wonders what the alternative was? "I mean," Ginsberg writes, "that in bankrolling cadres of intellectuals — thru research foundations, Intelligence Agencies, social theorists, international relations experts, essayists, speakers, convocations and networks of International Literary magazines like *Encounter*, *Preuves*, *Der Monat*, *Quest* — There was one in South America too, wasn't there? — the CIA promoted and subsidized and organized and encouraged — put energy into — nourished — sustained artificially — the development of an ethos, language, set of thought-forms & economic-cultural presumptions based, to put it crudely, on the oil Industry. At the expense of a natural non-monopolistic economy, Culture & Poetics." This economy "might have to be developed out of a decentralized energy base — Solar, Wind, Tree-Crop Agrarian, individualized Cultures," and it will be "labor-intensive."

The field of Middle Eastern Studies finds its Cold War history in this sensorium of "oil Bigness." Ginsberg invites us to speculate as to what kind of decentralized artistic and intellectual labor might enter into a sensorium with Solar Energy, or Wind. At Bandung, there was an epochal call to historicize Afro-Asian culture before the four-hundred-year *longue-durée* of European colonial and imperial rule. Before oil and coal, before the East India Companies, while the winds drive Sindbad at times against his will, and other times to murderous profit; a long history of solar-based storytelling can be located in the figure of Shahrazad as she awaits her fate, the suspense dictated by the sun's approach upon the horizon.

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[1] Arbella Bet-Shlimon. 2019. *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk*. Stanford University Press: 5.

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## How to Cite

Holt, Elizabeth M.. July 6, 2022. "Oil Sensoria." *Global South Studies*. Originally published in Jadaliyya: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42665>. Accessed date.